DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 063 736 EM 009 892

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TITLE Problems Associated with Developing State Vocational-Technical Education Information Dissemination Systems.
INSTITUTION Ohio State Univ., Columbus. Center for Vocational and Technical Education.
PUB DATE 19 Apr 72
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Association for Educational Communication and Technology Annual Convention (Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 16-22, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Information Centers; *Information Dissemination; Information Networks; *Information Services; Information Sources; *Information Utilization; Research Utilization; *Use Studies; *Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS ERIC

ABSTRACT

The ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) system, a useful source of information on educational resources, is described briefly. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Vocational and Technical Education has been trying to develop an effective information network within that field by developing information resources, producing a guide to information systems, conducting a user study, and administering training workshops. In so doing, it has discovered several problems. 1) The vast audience of practitioners at the local level are unfamiliar with ERIC, although they are spending a lot of time seeking information and are dissatisfied with their results. 2) Information products are frequently in the wrong form. Teachers like journals and magazines, but researchers prefer original reports. 3) ERIC products are not reaching the local practitioners. 4) Information users need training in ERIC, as do information specialists who want to serve these users. Commitment to developing an information dissemination system at state and local levels is lacking. However, both researchers and educational practitioners need better information and are enthusiastic about the potential of the ERIC system once they have used it successfully. (JK)

ED 063736

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PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DEVELOPING STATE VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL EDUCATION INFORMATION DISSEMINATION SYSTEMS

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Presented to
Industrial Training and Education Division
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Minneapolis, Minnesota

April 19, 1972

EM 009892

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH DEVELOPING STATE VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL EDUCATION INFORMATION DISSEMINATION SYSTEMS

A sobering aspect of convention-going is the certainty that one's return will be greeted by a desk, groaning with an information overload. It is no wonder that the firmest convention-inspired resolve to adopt a new practice weakens when faced with this overload. Further; this random information overload probably accounts for the often replicated research finding that information users prefer nearby, friendly sources of information.

The ERIC System

Nearby, friendly sources of information are frequently inadequate and unreliable for the important decisions that must be made in all of the educational enterprise, especially in vocational-technical or career education. A rational, deliberate attempt to generate authentic research findings has been augmented by a national information system for education--ERIC. ERIC stands for Educational Resources Information Center, a branch of the National Center for Educational Communications in the U.S. Office of Education. ERIC's purpose is to make available to the educational community the valuable research and related material which might otherwise remain unknown to it. A brief description of this system is essential to my explanation of the problems which have been associated with capacitating state-level organizations to extend the system to the ultimate users (educators) and beneficiaries (students).

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Vocational and Technical Education

There are 18 ERIC clearinghouses. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Vocational and Technical Education is one of these and has the mission of acquiring, selecting, abstracting, indexing, storing, retrieving, analyzing, and

disseminating research, instructional, and related materials within its scope. This ERIC Clearinghouse is also a division of The Center for Vocational and Technical Education at The Ohio State University at Columbus, Ohio. The Center has a deep and continuing commitment to improve vocational and technical education or career education through a program of research, development, leadership training, diffusion, field service, and special projects. Within this context, The Center has aided its component ERIC Clearinghouse in work with state research coordination units.

The ERIC Clearinghouse has been developing the document base through monthly inputs to Research in Education (RIE)[1] and Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE).[2] It has announced 10,139 through its own Abstracts of Instructional Materials (AIM)[3] and Abstracts of Research Materials (ARM).[4] Now each in their eighteenth issue, AIM and ARM are being received by over 2,500 users. A recompilation of AIM, by occupational areas, will soon be available from the U.S. Government Printing Office.

Most documents indexed in Research in Education are available in hard copy and microfiche in their full text. Microfiche stores easily and brings a wealth of information (over 50,000 documents) within the reach of most organizations with aspirations to serve the information needs of their clientele. The collection may also be searched by computer. Computer tapes now are available for RIE, CIJE, AIM, and ARM. The ERIC Clearinghouse also has developed reviews and syntheses of research in the occupational areas and on a range of critical topics. The 69 papers already developed will soon be supplemented by 27 currently under development.

A Developmental Program

Concurrent with development of these resources, The Center and Clearinghouse have been endeavoring to capacitate state research coordination units (RCU) for their avowed dissemination role. As early as 1968, The Center convened a committee of RCU directors to develop guidelines for such a role. The committee's work led to a Guide for State Vocational-Technical Education Information Systems[5] which has been distributed widely.

The committee recommended that The Center engage several state RCU's in a program to improve the Guide through close cooperation with The Center. The principal outcome of this activity was a study of over 3,200 vocational education administrators, counselors, local directors, researchers, supervisors, teacher educators, and teachers. The study was designed to examine the awareness, needs, use, and usefulness of various information sources, services, and products, especially with respect to form, time, and space relationships. The principal recommendations arising from the study were that local information sources be more thoroughly developed and that user education be accelerated. The findings are reported in Interpretation of Target Audience Needs in the Design of State Vocational-Technical Education Information Dissemination Systems.[6]

The study findings and experience with state RCU's served as the basis for two workshops for 32 information specialists or RCU directors from 26 states. A continuing series of research studies at The Center will further explicate user needs and point toward further developmental imperatives.

Problems

The problems encountered in developing information resources or in producing the Guide, conducting the user study, and administering the training workshops have been both interesting and exasperating. However, I

shall restrict my remarks to the problems which I believe adversely affect the eventual development of an effective information network for vocational-technical or career education.

1. Access to information products and services is lacking for the vast audience of practitioners

The local target audience is largely at the local level where professional information resources are poorly developed. These practitioners are spending great amounts of time seeking information (an average of 16 hours per month). They are using local sources and are less than satisfied. They are unfamiliar with ERIC (over 55 percent), but are anxious to learn about it (over 85 percent).

2. Information products are frequently in the wrong form or users need help in their use

Journals and magazines are rated highly by teachers, but other groups such as researchers prefer original reports. Relevance to the problem, speed of obtaining, currentness, and brevity are highly valued characteristics.

3. ERIC information products are not reaching the local practitioners

Though highly valued by those who have access, most ERIC products are not reaching the local level. The need for more widespread distribution of products or further development of close-by information resources is apparent.

4. Information users need training, as do information specialists who would serve these users

We have had frequent indications that would-be users of ERIC and other systems become discouraged in their first attempts to find information. Typically these users are intelligent enough to master the system on their

own. They simply will not take the time to learn the system when they are seeking information and have no reason to do so at other times. A user-education program is badly needed in pre- and inservice teacher education.

5. Commitment to developing an information dissemination system at state and local levels is lacking

Researchers have been reluctant to get involved in information dissemination systems. It requires a continuing management commitment and special skills. Educational practitioners also are reluctant to get involved because they are suspicious of research and have come to rely upon personal sources of information, however inadequate. Both groups need better information and both are enthusiastic about the potential inherent in the system once they've successfully used it.

Summary

Problems in development of information dissemination systems include lack of access for local practitioners, inappropriate information products, inadequate distribution of information products, lack of training programs for information users, and insufficient commitment by relevant institutions, agencies and individuals.

Solution of these five problems will go a long way toward better dissemination.

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